

The Buddhist Criteria of Ethics

(Transcribed from Prof. Oliver's Lecture)

1. The Duality of Good and Bad

Some schools of sociology and philosophy do not accept that good and bad exist in actual fact. The reason why they don't accept is that what is good for one society is bad for another society. They insist that there is no universal truth in ethics. Good and bad differ from the society to society, from country to country, and from individuals to individuals. They maintain that it is to be something to study not to be followed: smoking is good for one society while it is bad in other societies; there are various examples given for this. Therefore those schools of sociology and philosophy insist that it is illogical to come to ethical conclusions.

Buddhism deviates from this. Very specifically Buddhism states that **there is good which differs from bad**; in other words, **duality of good and bad** is accepted by Buddhism. There are some statements which are relevant to this in the Buddhist discourses:

(1) *atthi, bhikkhave, kusalam; atthi, bhikkhave, akusalam*

(2) *idaṃ kusalamti tena bhagavatā suppaññatam; idaṃ akusalamti tena bhagavatā suppaññattam*

The terms **atthi** (there is) and **suppaññata** (the Buddha has decreed) indicate the existence of good (*kusala*) and bad (*akusala*) in the society as an actual fact.

In **Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta** (MN), the Sāriputta says, "The knowledge which differentiates good from bad makes the vision of the individuals straight": *ujugatāssa diṭṭhi hoti* (his view becomes straight). If the individual does not accept that there is good and bad, his vision is crooked. So the vision becomes straight only when the person accepts the existence of good and bad. On various other occasions the Buddha has declared that good and bad exist.

Buddhism has come forward with **ethical truth**, not only with **ethical knowledge**. In those schools of sociology and philosophy, what is found is ethical knowledge, not truth; for them good and bad differ from the society to society and from individuals to individuals; there is nothing call truth. But according to Buddhism, **good and bad are universal phenomena**. For example, the Buddha says, "if the Brahmin say that all living being should not be killed, what is said is true, not because it is the opinion of the Brahmin but because it is the ethical truth." According to Buddhism, ethics is to be followed, not only to be studied.

In fact, duality is not usually encouraged by Buddhism. It is the one of the major problem of the human being; we have to face duality all the time; man is drowned into confusion by various kinds of duality. There is a discourse called **Dvayatānupassanā Sutta** (SNP) which is the discourse on seeing the

duality. In the Sutta, the Buddha advises monks to be careful of various forms of duality. But when comes to ethics, Buddhism talks of **ethical fact of good and bad**; there is duality of good and bad; they are not relative terms; each exists independently. There are various terms, which indicate the duality of good and bad, given in the Pāli canon as follows:

- (1) *kusala and akusala* (good and bad)
- (2) *puñña and pāpa* (good deed and evil deed)
- (3) *karaṇīya and akaraṇīya* (what is to be done and what is not to be done)
- (4) *sevitabba and asevitabba* (what is associated and what is not to be associated)
- (5) *sukkhā and kanha* (white; fare side of ethics and dark side of ethics)
- (6) *bhāvetabba and phātabba* (what is to be developed and what is to be avoid)

There are various others which indicate the **existence of good and bad as actual social fact**. We can see just the first words as example: what is good (*kusala*) is good in everywhere at all times; it cannot be bad (*akusala*) in anywhere, in any time. Therefore, Buddhism has come forward with ethics which is universally valid. Killing others is always bad in every society; refraining from killing is always good in every society. As we mentioned above, however, there are some schools of sociology and philosophy which can justify the act of killing in terms of relative social values. It is totally against Buddhist point of view. For Buddhism, **what is good is always good**: good in the beginning; good in the middle; good in the end. What is bad is always bad.

2. The Buddhist Morality of Good and Bad

There are three discourses which deal with the duality of good and bad in the Pāli canon: Bāhitika Sutta (MN), Ambalaṭṭhikā Rāhulovāda Sutta (MN), and Kālāma Sutta (AN).

(1) Bāhitika Sutta (MN)

There are certain key words which the Buddha has used in this Sutta; they are given in the forms of question and answer between the king Pasenadi of Kosala and Ven. Ānanda: "what is despised (*opārambha*) by the wise people?" The answer is given, "unwholesome (*akusala*)."
"What is unwholesome?" the answer is, "blameworthy; wrong (*sāvajja*)."
"What is wrong?" the answer is, "that brings obsession (*savyāpajja*)."
"What brings obsession?" the answer is, "that creates suffering (*dukkhaviṭṭhā*)."
"What creates suffering?" This is the last question and the most important answer for our topic is given:

- *attabyābādha* *samvattati* (which leads to one's own affliction)
- *parabyābādha* *samvattati* (which leads to the affliction of others)
- *ubhayabyābādha* *samvattati* (which leads to the affliction of both).

So the ultimate answer (position) which decides good and bad is objectively discussed in this sutta:

- (a) what brings harm to oneself is bad;
- (b) what brings harm to others is bad;
- (c) what brings harmful effect to both is bad.

This is **the criteria** for discerning what is bad (*akusala*); for good (*kusala*) is the opposite of this. What is good (*kusala*) is that brings beneficial effect to oneself, to others, and to both.

(2) Amalaṭṭhikarāhulovāda Sutta (MN)

While the Bāhitika Sutta gives the process of reaching the final answer, the Amalaṭṭhikarāhulovāda Sutta gives the last three criteria directly: in advising his 7 years old son, Ven. Rahula, at Amalaṭṭhika, the Buddha says that don't do anything which gives or creates harmful effects within you, others, and both.¹

(3) Kālāma Sutta (AN)

This well known discourse even among the non-Buddhist gives **different criteria** in judging what is good and bad. There has been misunderstanding about this Sutta: it is generally accepted among the Buddhists that Kālāma sutta advises to reject the traditional system of knowledge; but it is wrong interpretation.

The Kālāmas live in the area called Kesaputta to which various groups of teachers used to go. Those preachers taught different religious doctrines, philosophies, and sociologies. They also taught various things about good and bad so that the Kālāmas became perplexed; they could not understand what is good and bad; they eventually went to the Buddha for asking the solution for their problem. Therefore, the problem they brought to the Buddha was **not doctrinal problem but the ethical problem**. Then the Buddha answered, "You yourself decide what is good and bad; you don't have to rely on others such as traditions or logics in order to decide good and bad." There is no suggestion in the Sutta to reject the traditional system of knowledge; the Buddha just emphasized that without the help of traditional knowledge one can decide what is good and bad. The Buddha gives a formula or criteria:

"what is thought, said and done on the basis of greed (**lobha**), hatred (**dosa**) and delusion (**moha**) is bad; what is thought, said and done on the basis of non-desire (**alobha**), non-hatred (**adosa**) and non-delusion (**amoha**) is good. In order to conclude this, you don't need to go to the traditional means of knowledge."

Then the Buddha gives various examples of that if harming others is carried out on the basis of greed, hatred and delusion, it is bad in anywhere in anytime and in any places.

After saying so, the Buddha emphasizes that **you yourself should know** what is valid as ethical fact and that you **should not rely on other 10 authorities**: the first one is **anussava** which is the traditional religious knowledge so called revealed knowledge or revelation. It may be valuable for other things but not for decision of good and bad. Killing may be praised by *anussava*, but killing is definitely bad because it is based on *lobha*, *dosa* and *moha*. Don't follow just because *anussava* says it is good.

¹ It is interesting to note that the Buddha gives the advice of what to do in order to avoid evil acts in all three occasions: the past, present, and future. See MN (translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi), p. 524-525.

We have discussed the Buddhist morality based on both **psychological aspect** and **practical aspect**. Psychological aspect is triple: lobha, dosa, and moha; alobha, adosa, and amoha. Practical aspect is the usefulness or otherwise useless practice to oneself and others.

In India morality is considered as *puñña* and *pāpa*; these two are recommended to all Indian religions. As I might say earlier, a reaction against religion emerged in the forms of materialism which had critical view about the religious concepts of *puñña* and *pāpa*. That is because in religion *puñña* was described as reborn oriented while *pāpa* as punishment oriented. The materialist's opinion was that morality of *puñña* and *pāpa* was not genuine. On the one hand, man is made scared and the other is bright. Therefore, the materialistic tendency during the time of the Buddha was very typical morality; classical example of this was **Pūraṇa Kassapa**. He said that one can go along the bank of the Ganges river by killing and harming millions of people without accumulating *pāpa* at all; he can also walk along the other side of the bank of the river by giving alms, helping others, and doing whatever good things; but still he would not have any *puñña*; there is nothing for *puñña* or *pāpa*; they are illusions.

As we know, the **materialistic criticism** of various religious dogmas was taken into consideration in Buddhism. The materialistic criticism of *puñña* and *pāpa* was also considered and extended in formulating the Buddhist theory of morality. The Buddha did not totally reject the concept of *puñña* and *pāpa*. While accepting the efficacy of them as social tools, the Buddha introduced two new terms in describing morality; they are *kusala* and *akusala*.

In all the other religions in the 6th century B.C. the terms used for morality were *puñña* and *pāpa*. But while accepting these two terms, **the Buddha introduced new terms: kusala and akusala**. The problem of *puñña* and *pāpa* is that man carries the *pāpa* either of fear or of afraid while he performs the act of *puñña* thinking that he would be benefited either in this life or in the life after this. One refrains from *pāpa* because he is afraid of being punished in this life or in next life. Both *puñña* and *pāpa* are done on the basis of lobha, dosa, and moha. It is sometimes misunderstood by some people that *puñña* is done without lobha, dosa and moha; but it is not true. *Puñña* is **also motivated by lobha, dosa and moha** because those who do *puñña* expect more; as a result of *puñña* man expects next one. Therefore, very basis of *puñña* is greed which is to be eradicated in Buddhism. The greed is condemned in Buddhism.

Therefore, in various parts of discourses, the Buddha has introduced *kusala* and *akusala*: *kusala* is act done **without lobha, dosa and moha**; the act of *kusala* does not take the doer into the saṃsara for long period because *kusala* is **nearer to nibbāna**. The English term for *kusala* is 'skillfulness' which is a psychological term. The man is made skillful so that he could realize nibbāna very soon by the performing *kusala*.

In the **Padhāna Sutta** (*Suttanipāta*), the bodhisatta says that he is not interested in piling up *puñña* because *puñña* does not take him into the final realization. Arahant in Buddhism is described as the person who has got rid of both *puñña* and *pāpa*; but he is the person who has accumulated the noblest

kusala (**paramakusala**). While the Arahant leaves *puñña* and *pāpa*, he accumulates *kusala* more and more. As we know, the Arahant performs all rites and rituals, offers the flowers and incense, chants, discourses, and worships, so on. The difference between acts which have done by the ordinary person and by the Arahant is that **the ordinary person accumulates *puñña* by those actions but the Arahant accumulates *kusala***. Arahant would not produce any more results because *kusala* leads us to stop producing more results while *puñña* leads us to produce results more and more.

By introducing *kusala* and *akusala*, Buddhism **revolutionized the moral teaching** in the system of Indian religion. There are four people in the Society in relation to the moral acts that one performs. There are **four individuals**:

- (1) The individual who does not pursues his or others moral well being.
- (2) The individual who pursues the moral well being of others.
- (3) The individual who pursues the moral well being of himself.
- (4) The individual who purses the moral well being of both himself and others.

The Buddha gives these four individuals in another discourse of the **Catukkanipāta Sutta** (AN). These four individuals are given in the ascending order of the excellence: the worst is the first and the best is the last. It is interesting to note that the person who pursues the well being of himself is superior to the person who pursues the well being of others. Buddhism sees that one must be secured first then others also can be secured. The Buddha says that the person who is stuck in mud cannot save another person who is also stuck in mud; one must come out of mud first then he can save others who are stuck in mud. Therefore you must be morally good first then you can be good to others. This is why the **Dhammapada** says thus: ***attadattham paratthena / baunā pi na hāpaya***. That means self interest or one's own well being (*attadattham*) should not be forgotten (*na hāpaya*) due to so much of well being to be carried out for others (*paratthena baunā*). That is why in the classification above the person who purses the well being of himself is given as higher than the person who purses the well being of others even though the ideal is in the position of the person who purses the well being of both himself and others.

3. The Buddhist Criteria of Evaluation of Morality

There are various criteria of evaluation of morality employed in Buddhism. I will tell you three of these:

(1) The criteria of authority

In this regard, the Buddha has recognized three authorities:

(a) *attādhīpatēyya*: one's own authority; authority of oneself; individual's authority.

Each individual himself can decide what is good and what is bad. Each one has consciousness by which his moral decision should be satisfied. If what is done is criticized by one's own mind, that action should be avoided; each one can decide what he should do or not.

(b) *lokādhīpateyya*: we have to consider the authority of the world (others) because we live among others; they take decisions regarding ourselves.

There are thousands of people who criticize our acts especially the learned (wise) people. The Buddha says that don't do anything which is criticized by the wise people. One of the most important criteria is **the opinion of the wise** (praised by them or blamed by them); even though the smallest act, if it is praised by the wise, should be performed while the smallest act which is criticized by the wise should not be performed.

(c) *dhammādhīpateyya*: nothing should be done to violate what is generally accepted in the society.

Dhamma here is not the doctrine of Buddhism; it is law, custom, various norms accepted in the society; dhamma is the accepted opinion in the society.

(2) The criteria of three levels of operation of morality and immorality

The immoral and moral acts should operate at three levels thus:

- (a) *anusaya***: the latent level or tendency; immorality operates within our self in the inner most level of our mind.
- (b) *pariyutṭhāna***: the tendencies which are bottom of the mind but sometimes come to the surface of the mind.
- (c) *vītikkaṃa***: without waiting at the surface of the mind the immoral or moral acts come out either through the mouth or body or the mind.

In the first level, others cannot see our moral or immoral state because it is completely latent in our mind. At the second level, the person looks good and even saintly; but sometimes he starts behaving differently from usual so that others can see with surprise; he becomes fury and even physically changes. The nature of the acts, however, can be seen only at the third level because they are always manifested. Therefore, Buddhism says that the immorality and morality should be addressed separately at these all three levels.

The morality should be done first at the *vītikkaṃa* level. That is how the *sīla* becomes the first step of the path in the threefold training (*Tisso Sikkhā*). ***Sīla*** is needed to suppress immoral physical, verbal and mental activities at the ***vītikkaṃa*** level; when one stands firm in *sīla*, one becomes moral outward. That is because immorality is still operating at the level of *pariyutṭhāna* and *anusaya*. The bad tendency carries to the surface of the mind at the ***pariyutṭhāna*** level; to get rid of immorality at this level, we need concentration (***Samādhi***). However, the morality is still not completed because it is operating at the ***anusaya*** level, the latent tendency; to eradicate this remained tendency, we need ***Pañña***. Therefore, the three-fold training is recommended by the Buddha to make the person morally perfect.

It is to be noted that **morality in Buddhism is always combine with wisdom, that is, knowledge**. Without knowledge there is no morality and without morality there is no knowledge. Both are **interconnected** and **interdependent**. That is why it is said in the ***Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*** (DN) thus: "***Pañña*** is dependent on virtue (***sīlaparibhāvita pañña***) and ***Sīla*** is dependent on *pañña*

(*paññāparibhāvitam sīlaṃ*).” Both are interconnected, should go together; one cannot develop in separation and in isolation. One becomes moral because his knowledge comes to be moral.

There are two discourses in *Majjhimanikāya* which are important in this regard: one is the *Samaṇamañḍikā Sutta* and the other is *Indriyabhāvanā Sutta*. It is said by the Buddha quite often that one washes one hand with the help of the other hand and one can wash one foot with the help of the other hand. Single hand cannot work alone. That is how **morality and knowledge are correlated**.

In the *Samaṇamañḍikā Sutta* (MN), the Buddha criticizes an opinion of the contemporary teacher who used to say that if one does not do evil by body, if one does not speak bad words through mouth, if one does not think bad thoughts mentally, he is morally perfect. That particular teacher is named **Ugahamana**. Then the Buddha said:

“If what you say is correct, the person who is absolutely perfect in morality is the baby just born because he does not do any evil by his body, he does not know even how to speak, and he does not know what the thinking is. But what happens to the baby is from the time of born he becomes little by little bad. The reason for this is that the knowledge that should go with morality has not arisen in the baby born yet. The morality becomes meaningful and operates only with knowledge in the person. Knowledge purifies and develops morality and morality purifies and develops knowledge. That is how I differ from Ugahamana.”

In the *Indriyabhāvanā Sutta* (MN), there was another contemporary teacher of the Buddha called **Pārāsariya**. One of his pupils met the Buddha and informed his teacher teaches that the absolute abstention in organs is the perfection of morality: the eye should not see; the ear should not hear, the nose should not smell; the mouth should not speak; the body should not develop contact; the mind should not think. Thus the absolute abstention of senses is how one should be perfect in morality. The Buddha did not accept this position by giving a simple example:

“If your teacher says is correct, the most perfect people in morality are deaf and blind. My teaching of morality is quite different from that. What I say is that the eye should see, the ear should hear, the nose should smell, the mouth should talk, the body should contact, and the mind should think. The sense organs should be fully operated to the outside world but still person should not be disturbed by the objects that he takes through the sense organs. This is morality that I say.”

According to Buddhism, **morality is not the complete abstention from the sense organs** but the abstention from tasting the objects which are taken through the sense organs. Buddhism does not say that one should leave the society to be morally perfect. One can be morally perfect while being in the society. In the forest, in the caves, and in the cemetery, any one can be good, but it is difficult for the person to be good in contact with others. What the Buddha says in the end of the Sutta is that “to be good person, behave well, take good and ignore bad!”